

Why I recommend all doctors — indeed, everybody — to read good books deeply every day

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Reading is enormously important to me. I can't imagine a life without reading. In this indulgent essay I make the case for reading, arguing that you should read not because it is virtuous but because it is pleasurable and enriching and gives you insights that are not available elsewhere. Poetry is the highest form of writing, but to read nothing but poetry would be akin to drinking nothing but whisky. Fiction is the next highest form, and I advocate starting each day with 45 minutes reading fiction, 30 minutes non-fiction, and 15 minutes poetry. I elaborate on the benefits of each and recommend a few examples of each genre. My aim in this article is to make you one of the people who reads every day, preferably for more than an hour.

I hope that you don't think of reading as a passive activity. The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood says that when you sit quietly reading a novel your brain is at its most active. From the words on the page, you must create a picture of the characters, the scene, the sounds, smells, accents, everything. She also says that reading a novel is the closest you can ever come to being in the head of another person. What could be more exciting than that? After 71 years of being me, I'm keen to take every opportunity to know what it's like to be somebody else.

Reading is a magical activity, more magical than magic tricks. By definition you can read if you are reading this, but UNESCO reports that there are around 800 million adults, most of them women, who are illiterate. Despite my attempts to use the plainest English, many millions more would not be able to read this article because their level of literacy is low. Perhaps even you, distinguished reader, struggle to read Shakespeare in English or Proust even in your own language. I can't read *Beowulf*, one of the treasures

of English literature, and Chaucer is difficult. I fear that you may take your ability to read for granted and have forgotten how magical it is.

For me reading is more magical than film, theatre, and the spoken word on the radio, which involve seeing and hearing people, something we all do all the time. They are also much more passive activities than reading, and they are pushed at us without us being able to control the pace. Painting and sculpture come close to matching the magic of reading, and music is a serious rival.

My hope is that you don't need to be convinced of the magic and beauty of reading, but I fear that it may not have the priority it deserves in your life. More than half of Britain's adults do not read for "pleasure" (I don't like that word because good reading may be painful, but it's designed to exclude reading for work or duty) in a week, and only one in five reads for pleasure every day. Norwegians are, I suspect, more enthusiastic readers. Is it those long nights? I understand that something like one in five Norwegians has read some of Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume autobiography (I've read only the first two). I don't think that there is any modern English book that has been read by such a high proportion of the population, although the Harry Potter books (which I have not read) might come close.

My aim in this article is to make you one of the people who reads every day, preferably for more than an hour.

A confession on method and references

The editor has allowed me to put this article together from blogs and articles I have written over the past 12 years. I tell you this so that I won't be accused of self-plagiarism. Well, I am self-plagiarising, but I'm telling you so. There is no deception, and, as I heard once at a conference on publication ethics and misconduct, "disclosure is almost a panacea."

I have written around 3000 blogs, which have been posted on the *BMJ* or *Guardian* websites and on my own website. A high proportion of them are about books. I have been reading good books since I was about 10 (I'm now 71), and the chain has never been broken, even when I was a junior doctor working more than 80 hours a week. This is not a boast (well, perhaps it is), but I tell you to show how important reading has been in my life. For the first 55 years I did not keep a record of what I read, but these days I record everything I read on the website *Goodreads*. I write something about every book and usually I write a blog, which has at the end multiple quotes from the book. I see myself as squeezing every last drop from every book.

But you never get to the end of great books, and as I approach the end of my life I'm rereading many books. Usually, I enjoy them even more. Having said that there are not many books that I've read three times, but

among them are *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (““one of the few English novels written for grownup people,” said Virginia Woolf snootily), *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (one of the few great books that is accompanied by a great film), and *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck (a book that can be read in two hours.)

I need to say something as well about references. This article mentions many famous books, and I don't intend to reference them all. You will know many of them and can find them in an instant on the internet, on Amazon, or in the library. I will reference the blogs I have cannibalised in writing this essay.

The editor asks me where I source my books. Although my mother was a great reader, our house contained few books. Instead, we went every week to Rotherhithe Library and filled up with books. Libraries are one of humanity's greatest inventions. Once I had an income, I began to buy books, almost always paperbacks, and stopped going to the library. As my waistline swelled so did my library, but as soon as e-books appeared I bought a Kindle—and my choice is to read on a Kindle. I like that I can enlarge the print, read without putting the light on when my wife is sleeping, highlight sections and copy them out afterwards, and search the text. I'm irritated when I have to read a physical book because it's not available as an e-book, particularly when it's a fat book. The only exception to my choice to read on a Kindle is poetry—because the layout on the page is part of the poem.

Maybe I am a reader above all else

I am many things, and I have been many more. I'm or have been a son, brother, husband, grandfather, friend, writer, blogger, chair of various bodies, manager, leader, walker, dreamer, cook, doctor, television performer, poet, teacher, and speaker; and I have been a student, feeder of locusts, farm-worker, traveller, editor, boyfriend, chief executive, painter, musician, and listener. Some of those things I've done well and some poorly. But one thing that I love, have been longer than I have been anything apart from son and brother, and think I am good at is being a reader (fig 1). Could the one thing that best defines me be that I am a reader (1)?

Everybody, you think, is a reader. Everybody reads. You can't define yourself as a reader. But I'm much more a reader than I am a doctor, although I have a degree in medicine, was once registered with the General Medical Council, and treated patients. That was a long time ago, and I never felt a doctor as I feel a reader. Similarly, I was an editor for 25 years, but I'm not now—and being an editor didn't capture me. I'm a writer of sorts, and writing is important to me—but I'm a far better reader than I am writer.



*Figure 1: I am a reader above all else, writes Richard Smith.
(Photo: Lin Smith)*

From early on I became discerning (my wife would say snobbish) about what I read. I've steered clear of newspapers and, I must confess, medical and scientific journals (even though I spent 25 years editing one) and have concentrated on books. I strongly support the British novelist Martin Amis's assertion that "the truth is in the fiction," and so a novel always comes first in my reading. A friend advised me to read no novels published in the past 30 years but let time sort out the best novels. I haven't followed his advice to the letter, but I've probably read more novels that are older than 30 years, many of them 19th century novels, than more recent ones; and I'm often disappointed by newer novels but rarely disappointed by the older ones.

I have, I believe, become a better reader. Because I read "good" books I never speed read, and I read many paragraphs twice. Poems I always read twice, and there are many I've read a hundred times.

I've come increasingly to believe that when we read a book, particularly fiction, we read ourselves (more on this later).

My wife thinks that I've been driven mad by reading too many books. When she said that I immediately quoted *Don Quixote*, illustrating her point. It is true that the books I'm reading and have read become part of

my life. One consequence is that I often refer to them in my conversations because what we are discussing reminds me of a book. This must, I fear, sound pretentious.

My advice on when to read

Good reading demands your full attention, and you should read when your mind is at its best (fig. 2). That is at different time for different people, but for me it is first thing in the morning. If you are like me, I advise that an excellent way to start the day is with 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading (2). I prescribe 45 minutes of fiction, 30 minutes of non-fiction, and 15 minutes of poetry. The fiction must be deep, deal with issues that matter (death, love, relationships), and have excellent style. The non-fiction should also ideally be well written—because excellent style will get your brain started in the right way. The poetry—and remember that most poetry is bad, so be careful—will give you a rhythm for the day.

Other ways to start the day are prayer, meditation, and yoga, and I always enjoy being in Muslim countries where a day of learning starts with sung verses from the Koran. Reading, I believe, achieves the same end as these alternative methods, particularly as you are still and silent. You are, I suppose, filling your brain rather than emptying it, which sounds bourgeois and consumerist. But you are—if reading correctly—filling your brain with excellent mental nutrition.

We are all familiar with “he must have got out of the wrong side of bed this morning,” and the way we start the day is crucial for the whole day. The reading sets us up beautifully to cope with the inanities, rush, trivia, silly demands, and ugliness that will inevitably occur during even the best of days.

You must make your own choices on what to read (although I am willing to prescribe), but let me illustrate my general advice with the start that I made the morning I first wrote these words. I began with 30 pages of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, specifically one of the furious and barely intelligible arguments between Semprini and Naptha and then a detailed account of the death of one of the characters. I learn that when dying “Even the most manly men succumb to credulous, oblivious self-deception; the process is as natural as melancholy when the process of deterioration approaches its fatal end.” A *momento mori* is highly refreshing in the early morning. (Ideally you wouldn’t read in translation but in the original language, but I’m too stupid.)

Then to 16th century Venice, an excellent place to start the day, to read of Titian painting *Sacred and Profane Love*, one of the greatest pictures of

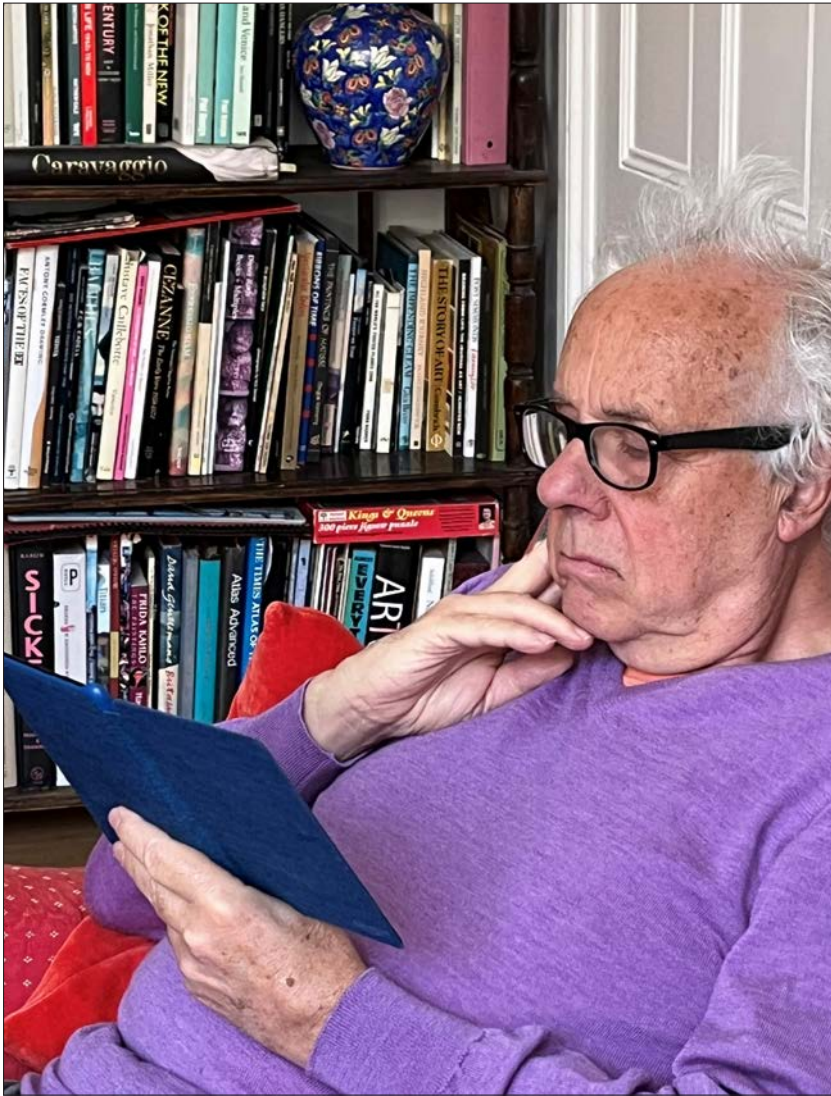


Figure 2. "Good reading demands your full attention, and you should read when your mind is at its best." (Photo: Lin Smith)

the Italian renaissance. What might the picture mean? Nobody knows or will ever know, which is wonderful, but Sheila Hale in her biography of Titian believes it to be the painterly equivalent of a poem written for a wedding, an important Venetian custom.

And to poetry. Stevie Smith's *Away Melancholy*:

The ant is busy
He carrieth his meat,
All things hurry
To be eaten or eat.
Away, melancholy.
Man, too, hurries
Eats, couples, buries,
He is an animal also
With a hey ho melancholy,
Away with it, let it go.

You might go further and like my friend, Ant (a man not the insect above), learn some verses by heart. Ant learns poems every morning as he shaves.

For the couple, especially the single parent, who must get children out of bed, dress and feed them, send them to school, and then run for the crowded train, my advice will be unrealistic hogwash. And I haven't started each day in such a privileged way throughout my life, but think on this: might you do better to miss the television news at 10pm, go to bed at 9.30, wake at 5.30 (that's eight hours) and read for at least 30 minutes?

The case for fiction

A young English friend who is highly intelligent, speaks fluent Russian and Hungarian, lived in Moscow and now Madrid, and has travelled widely wrote to tell me that he had read zero fiction in the last year and that fiction seems a "cop out." I was appalled. He was making a serious—and, I dared to suggest, a stupid—mistake. I insisted that he change (3).

His logic, I suppose, is that fiction is "made up." It's not "real"; the characters "don't exist." In contrast, we have the diaries, letters, autobiographies, and biographies of real people, and histories of real events. In addition, we have books of psychology, sociology, science, philosophy, anthropology, archaeology, and the like that deal with the ways of real people. Why would anybody read about imagined people and events when he or she could read about real people and real events?

The core argument for reading fiction is that it's by far the best way to understand people, relationships, and essentials like love and death. As the physician and best-selling author Abraham Verghese writes in his new novel

The Covenant of Water “Fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about how the world lives.” Verghese’s book *Cutting for Stone*, which has sold millions of copies, is, I have argued, a “love letter to medicine” (4). Verghese, a professor of medicine at Stanford, is a great advocate for the value of clinical examination, and in the novel he writes: “How exciting to be able to touch a human being with one’s fingertips and know all these things about them” (5).

Let me enlarge on Martin Amis’s quote of the truth being in the fiction by using the example of his stepmother, Elizabeth Jane Howard. She lived a long and colourful life and wrote many novels. She didn’t write an autobiography, but there is a biography of her life—and she left letters. What should we read if we want to understand Howard to know what it was like to be her? An autobiography if one existed would be both partial and censored. A biography is one person’s view of a mass of facts and events; it’s necessary to impose some sort of narrative to make the book readable, and the result will be selective and distorted. Letters are written to individuals and have a purpose different from revelation. We learn much more about Howard, I argue, by reading her novels: there she can write about relationships, marriage, affairs, and struggles directly without having to censor. And in doing so she will give us deeper insights into humanity, relationships, and, paradoxically, real people and herself than we can ever hope to gain through reading psychology or sociology.

My young friend seems to contradict himself in his message to me. He writes: “In fact reading Russian literature is less for me about the stories than it is about understanding the country and mentality, for incorporating myself into the ‘Russian mind’” (6). Exactly, I respond, the stories are mostly a means to an end not an end in themselves (7). How best to go about understanding the “Russian mind?” Speaking Russian, living in Russia, marrying a Russian, and mixing and working with Russians, as my young friend has done, are probably the best ways, but the understanding will be deeper if complemented by reading. Yes, he should read histories of Russia and biographies of Peter the Great, Lenin, and Stalin, but I think he will get closer to his mission by reading Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Chekhov than in any other way. And through his reading he will deepen his understanding not just of the Russian mind but of all minds.

Or think about how to understand women (if you are a man), love, and death? The best fiction (and I’m unashamed about my snobbishness when it comes to fiction) will take you far beyond any other kind of reading.

The importance of style

Then there is the question of style. Style, which great fiction has and most non-fiction lacks, is crucial to understanding. Martha Nussbaum, one of the leading living philosophers, argues that saying some important things about how to live, one of the traditional tasks of philosophers, depends on style and that literature can answer important questions that philosophy cannot. (8) She observes that modern Anglo-American philosophers use only the pallid, rational, bloodless, hygienic style of the natural sciences—and so inevitably fall short of telling us the best way to live. She argues this in part because of her lived experience. Her love life has been turbulent, and she has got more help and understanding from Dickens, Dostoevsky, James, and Proust (her favourites) than from philosophy. She quotes another writer, Cora Diamond:

“The pleasure of reading what has been written under the pressure of content shaping form, form illuminating content, has to do with one’s sense of the soul of the author in the text, and such pleasure, and such a sense of the soul of the author, is precisely what is irrelevant or out of place in the writing of professionals for professionals.”

The cleansing power of poetry

My young friend doesn’t mention poetry, and perhaps he devotes hours a day to reading poetry. But I fear that, as seems to be common, he may be even more disdainful of poetry than of fiction. This would be a terrible mistake.

Poets are the antennae of the world, detecting the beautiful and the damned before the rest of us do—and transmitting it to us. Poetry can express what prose cannot. Even those disdainful of poetry are driven to it by grief and love. “When power leads man toward arrogance,” said John F Kennedy, “poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.” “Poetry,” according to the English essayist William Hazlitt, “is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself.” Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, came to believe that only poetry not philosophy could answer the question of “What is it like to be a human being?” “Poetry engages us in a way that goes far beyond the mere exchange of information.”

Let me share brief sections from four of my favourite poems, all of which live with me day to day and let me know things I cannot know in other ways. In *Snow* the Irish poet Louis McNeice writes:

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

The Greek poet C V Cavafy's poem *Ithaca* describes a journey, the journey of Ulysses, the journey of life:

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

Alfred Tennyson also has a poem about *Ulysses*.

Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

And Shakespeare from his play *Cymbeline*.

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

“Every reader is the reader of himself [or herself]”

I recently read in Proust's *Time Regained* “Every reader is the reader of himself,” and it struck me instantly as true and profound; although I'd never thought it before, I had known it before. Now I'm extremely aware of it. We read ourselves not only line by line but also in what we choose to read (9).

I'm also aware that when I reread, as I do increasingly, a different me reads a different book. Of course, the book is not different, but the me—with accumulated experiences, knowledge, and reading together with decay and things forgotten—is different.

Hisham Matar, a Libyan writer, wrote about reading ourselves in the *New York Times* (10): "...the most magical moments in reading occur not when I encounter something unknown but when I happen upon myself, when I read a sentence that perfectly describes something I have known or felt all along. I am reminded then that I am really no different from anyone else.

All great art allows us this: a glimpse across the limits of our self. These occurrences aren't merely amusing or disorientating or interesting experiments in "virtual reality." They are moments of genuine expansion. They are at the heart of our humanity. Our future depends on them. We couldn't have gotten here without them.

Books...develop our emotional, psychological and intellectual life, and, by doing so, show us how and to what extent we are connected. This is why literature is the greatest argument for the universalist instinct, and this is why literature is intransigent about its liberty."

Favourite novels

I have listed 10 favourite novels on my website (11). In brief they are—in addition to *Middlemarch* and *The Leopard*, which I have already mentioned: *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo; *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck; *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas; *The Dance to the Music of Time* by Anthony Powell (which is actually 12 novels—Powell is often called "the English Proust" as Knausgaard is called "the Norwegian Proust"); *He Knew He Was Right* by Anthony Trollope (although I love Dickens I love Trollope more); *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky; *Abide with Me* by Elizabeth Strout; and *Humboldt's Gift* by Saul Bellow.

As I concede, this was a somewhat arbitrary selection, and on another day I probably would have come up with a different list. I notice now that only one of the books was written in the 21st century, and five were written in the 19th century; and only two of the books were by women. But I noticed at the time that seven were European and three from the US. I determined therefore to produce a list of favourite novels from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australasia as there are many novels from those countries that I have loved (12).

My list included *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; *Things Fall Apart* (a quote from the great Yeats's poem) by Chinua Achebe; *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan; *A Fine Balance*

by Rohinton Mistry; *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa; *Boyhood* by J M Coetzee; *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* by Madeleine Thein; *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh; *Fievel's Child* by Dalene Matthee; and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. That's three from India, three from Africa, two from Latin America, two from Australia, and one from China/Canada. (It is, I now notice, 11 not 10 books.) They were all written in the 20th or 21st century. Again, I would probably come up with a different list if I did it today, not least because I've now read more books.

Four non-fiction books for health professionals

"Limits to Medicine" by Ivan Illich

The non-fiction book that has had the biggest influence on me is *Limits to Medicine* by Ivan Illich published in 1974. Illich, who was once a Catholic priest, was a critic of industrial society and criticised not only medicine but also education, our transport systems, the disappearance of languages, and much else. He died in 2002, but when the greenhouse gases emitted by our ever-industrializing world threaten our survival he is being rediscovered and discovered for the first time by many.

Hearing him speak when I was a medical student in Edinburgh, was, as I have described (13), the closest I ever came to a religious experience. Illich argued that "the major threat to health in the world is modern medicine." He convinced me, not least because I felt that what I saw on the wards of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh was more for the benefit of doctors than patients. I dropped out of medical school that day. Three days later I dropped back in again, unsure what else to do.

I reread *Limits to Medicine* in 2003 and reviewed it for a journal. It seemed to me more relevant than ever, and I regularly urge young doctors to read the book. The book makes clear the harm that often results from health care 25 years before the Institute of Medicine Report doctors *To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System* led the harm from health care to begin to be taken seriously (14). His book also describes what might be called evidence-based medicine.

Health, argues Illich, is the capacity to cope with the human reality of death, pain, and sickness. Technology can help, but modern medicine has gone too far—launching into a godlike battle to eradicate death, pain, and sickness. In doing so, it turns people into consumers or objects, destroying their capacity for health.

Illich sees three levels of iatrogenesis. Clinical iatrogenesis is the injury done to patients by ineffective, toxic, and unsafe treatments. Social iatro-

genesis results from the medicalisation of life, a process that has progressed enormously in the 50 years since *Limits to Medicine*. Illich identified how the United States spent at the time of his book 8.4% of its gross national product on health care up from 4.5% in 1962. Can this be sensible? In 2022 it was nearly 20%.

Cultural iatrogenesis, the destruction of traditional ways of dealing with and making sense of death, pain, and sickness. “A society’s image of death,” argues Illich, “reveals the level of independence of its people, their personal relatedness, self-reliance, and aliveness... Society, acting through the medical system, decides when and after what indignities and mutilations he [the patient] shall die... Health, or the autonomous power to cope, has been expropriated down to the last breath.” Dying has become the ultimate form of consumer resistance.

“The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down” by Anne Fadiman

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down tells a tragic tale of how failure of understanding between a health system and a family leads to disaster despite everybody doing their best (15). The doctors and nurses of the California health system, social workers, and the judiciary went to extreme lengths to care for a Hmong child with severe epilepsy. The child suffered brain damage, which the family thought the result of the drugs described by the doctors. The doctor felt misunderstood, unappreciated, and angry.

Fadiman manages to make the reader understand and respect the views of both sides. She attributes her success to her insignificance. The Hmong are an ancient people from Laos who were offered residency in the United States after fighting for the CIA in Indochina. They believe that “loss of soul” is the main cause of illness and, like many peoples, that there is a positive aspect to epilepsy—in that its presence marks a person as a possible shaman.

The book shows how understanding and cooperation don’t come easily. It’s not just a matter of knowing a language and listening but also of understanding something of both the ancient and near history of a people, their beliefs, and their culture—something that nobody managed. In this case the division between the doctors and the family was particularly wide, but I think that such misunderstandings are common and can cause great grief on both sides.

As well as identifying important lessons, the book is a pleasure to read. (That’s less true of Illich’s book, which seems difficult to some.)

“Intoxicated by My Illness” by Anatole Broyard

Also a great joy to read is *Intoxicated by My Illness* by Anatole Broyard, a collection of essays on illness, life, and death that Broyard wrote after receiving a diagnosis of prostate cancer. The doctor of Jean Cocteau, the French poet and artist, is said to have treated him for free because he is the only person who could describe accurately his symptoms. Broyard is like Cocteau and provides insights into illness that doctors may otherwise gain only by being seriously ill themselves (16).

How would you feel if your patient said to you: “I want you to be my Virgil, leading me through my purgatory or inferno, pointing out the sights as we go?” Or how would you respond to: “I would like to discuss my prostate with you not as a diseased organ but as a philosopher’s stone.” These are words Broyard said to his physician.

Broyard was a literary critic and editor for the *New York Times* who died in 1990. He has a certain notoriety in that he was of mixed race but criticised for “passing” as white and denying his ancestry. He may have inspired Philip Roth’s book *The Human Stain* about a professor with a black background who pretended to be Jewish, although Roth denies it. (Roth, by the way, is one of my favourite authors, along with John Updike and Bellow. All are now notorious for what seems like misogyny. How much you steer away from artists because of their unwholesome beliefs or behaviour is a current concern. I lean towards reading everybody.)

His book was written at the end of Broyard’s life as he was dying of prostate cancer. It was his illness that brought him into contact with doctors and prompted his examination. He thought back as well to when his father was dying, and what he wants from a doctor is much more than technical skill. The book is filled with quotable quotes, and here are just a few (there are more in the original blog):

“To get to my body, my doctor has to get to my character. He has to go through my soul.”

“The doctor puts [the technical information] into a poem of diagnosis. So I want a doctor with a sensibility.”

“I want my doctor to have magic as well as medical ability.”

“I would like [my doctor] to know what I mean if I told him, like Baudelaire, ‘I cultivate my hysteria with joy and terror.’”

“I would be happier with a witty doctor who could appreciate the comedy as well as the tragedy of my illness.”

“Whether he wants to be or not, the doctor is a storyteller, and he can turn our lives into good or bad stories, regardless of the diagnosis.”

“Every patient invites the doctor to combine the role of priest, the philosopher, the poet, the lover. He expects the doctor to evaluate his entire life, like a biographer.”

“I’d like [my doctor] to know that I feel superior to him...that he is my patient also and I have my diagnosis of him.”

“Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state” by Hilary Cottam

In *Radical Help*, Hilary Cottam, a social designer, argues that the welfare state, something we all value, no longer responds adequately to 21st century problems: global warming, mass migration, demographic changes, chronic disease epidemics, concerns about security, and escalating inequality. The welfare state needs not just to change but to “pivot...a special kind of change that involves a new vision, a different solution and a new business model. The pivot offers transformation, the potential for something much better and more successful.” (17). It requires great courage to pivot, and many enterprises and businesses have failed because they lacked the courage.

To pivot the welfare state—and particularly the NHS—may be especially hard because of how the British love the institution. Cottam argues that “Our most difficult relationship—the one that most threatens our health—is our relationship with the medical establishment....Medicine has captured our hearts and our minds.” We look to doctors, other health professionals, and the NHS to solve problems that cannot be solved by drugs, operations, and even simple advice. To avoid dependency we need to look elsewhere for help—to ourselves, our family and friends, our communities, and civil society.

Cottam is not anti-doctor. She is about achieving a better balance between what the NHS does and what others do. The NHS, for example, was and is well designed for vaccinating the population against covid-19 and other infections, but it is not best placed to deal with loneliness, despair, inactivity, and unwise behaviour.

“The current welfare state,” writes Cottam, “has become an elaborate attempt to manage our needs. In contrast, twenty-first-century forms of help will support us to grow our capabilities....Traditional welfare approaches see you as dependent according to their biases and then in response they try to give you something or do something to you, to manage your need in the best way they know how. The capability approach shifts the way support is offered.”

Cottam recognises the centrality of relationships to our lives and health. “Relationships—the simple human bonds between us—are the foundation of good lives. They bring us joy, happiness, and a sense of possibility.... Building on relationships enables the growth of further capability: supporting us to learn, contributing to good health and vibrant communities. Without strong bonds with others, or with unhealthy relationships, very few of us can feel fulfilled—or even function.”

Most of the book is concerned with the practicalities of trying to pivot institutions like the welfare state and the NHS. I won't repeat them here, but for me Cottam describes the radical changes needed in a way that few others match. I see an overlap between the writings of Illich and Cottam in that she is trying to find a way to restore-or perhaps reinvent—some of what Illich describes us having lost.

There are many other non-fiction books that I could urge you to read, but let me mention just two: *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells (18), which will help you understand the seriousness of our predicament with climate change and the destruction of nature; and *Empire of Pain* by Patrick Radden Keefe (19), which reads like a novel and tells the story of the opioid crisis in the US.

How to talk about books that you haven't read

I want to end by seeming to undermine my core argument of how important it is to read by sharing how you can talk about books you haven't read. The advice comes in *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by the French philosopher Pierre Bayard (20). I imagined that the book must be a joke, but I was wrong. It's a serious book, albeit written with a light, teasing tone.

No matter how many books you have read you will have read only a tiny and diminishing fraction of all books. Many of these unread books—most works by Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Kant, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Marx's *Das Kapital*, Dante's *Inferno*, the *Bible*, the *Koran*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*—are the most important books ever written, books that have shaped and made our world. You know about them, but you haven't read them. (In fact, I have read some of them, but, as, I will explain in a moment, I am in the same position as somebody who hasn't read them.)

“Faced with a quantity of books so vast that nearly all of them must remain unknown,” Bayer writes, “how can we escape the conclusion that even a lifetime of reading is utterly in vain? Reading is first and foremost non-reading.”

Bayer urges you not to read these great books but to talk about them. “Cultural literacy involves the dual capacity to situate books in the collective library and to situate yourself within each book... it is ultimately unnecessary to have handled a book to have a sense of it and to express your thoughts on the subject.”

If you think you must read them, then skim them, argues Bayard. “Who, we may wonder, is the better reader—the person who reads a work in depth without being able to situate it, or the person who enters no book in depth, but circulates through them all?... We must guard against getting lost in any individual passage, for it is only by maintaining a reasonable distance from the book that we may be able to appreciate its true meaning.”

Then there are all the books you have read and forgotten completely—even the fact that you read them. I was halfway through Henry James’s *Wings of the Dove* before I realised I had read it before. I’d completely forgotten that I’d read George Eliot’s *Scenes From A Clerical Life* until I went to mark it on Goodreads as “want to read” and was pointed to the words I’d written about reading the book. Bayard asks: “Is a book you have read and completely forgotten, and which you have even forgotten you have read, still a book you have read?”

And you have forgotten most of the contents of the books you have read. “Reading is not just acquainting ourselves with a text or acquiring knowledge; it is also, from its first moments, an inevitable process of forgetting... What we preserve of the books we read—whether we take notes or not, and even if we sincerely believe we remember them faithfully—is in truth no more than a few fragments afloat, like so many islands, on an ocean of oblivion.”

Plus, what we think we have read is mixed with things that have happened to us, other books, films we have seen, and commentaries we have heard or read, and much else “As soon as we begin to read, and perhaps even before that, we begin talking to ourselves and then to others about books. We will resort thereafter to these comments and opinions, while actual books, now rendered hypothetical, recede forever into the distance.”

We all have, argues Bayard, “internal books” composed from multiple sources, and my internal book may overlap little or not at all with your internal book. “What we take to be the books we have read is in fact an anomalous accumulation of fragments of texts, reworked by our imagination and unrelated to the books of others, even if these books are materially identical to ones we have held in our hands.” When we talk about a book that we have both read (and, of course, largely forgotten) we are talking



Figure 3. Reading is “one of the finest ways to use our limited time on this planet” says Richard Smith who identifies with St Jerome, the patron saint of libraries and the first man to translate the Bible into Latin. Saint Jerome Writing by Caravaggio (1571–1610)

about two different books. Somebody who has not read the book can join the conversation as an equal.

Conclusion

The chances are that if you have ploughed your way through this long essay then you are a reader anyway, and I am preaching to the converted. Ultimately, I urge people, including my children, to read not because it is virtuous or because it will bring wisdom but because it is one of the finest ways to use our limited time on this planet (fig. 3).

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